

BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2016

THE SNL AFRICA DIASPORA COMMITTEE PRESENTS - DID YOU KNOW?

BY KAMILAH CUMMINGS

Did You Know? Annie Easley



Trailblazing NASA computer scientist and mathematician

Annie Easley began her amazing career with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1955. At the time, NASA was known as the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA). The center where Easley worked in Cleveland is known today as the Glenn Research Center.

Although Easley was first hired as a human computer to do calculations for engineers, throughout her 34-year career with NASA, she worked on a wide range of technologies and software in areas including nuclear-powered rocket systems, alternative energy, and energy improvement including storage battery life. Some of her work in the latter paved the way for the technology we use in hybrid vehicles.

A lifelong learner, Easley never rested on her laurels or let technology pass her. Although she initially attended Xavier University to become a pharmacist, her work led her to pursue a different path. When her department started to use actual computers, she returned to school and earned a degree in mathematics from Cleveland

State University in 1977, while still working full-time. Over the years she also learned computer programming and several coding languages.

Easley was also civic-minded. Before moving to Cleveland, she worked to teach black people in her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama how to pass the literacy test that black voters were required by law to take to vote. She also worked as an Equal Employment Opportunity counselor at NASA.

When speaking of the discrimination she experienced during her career, Easley stated, “When people have their biases and prejudices, yes, I am aware. My head is not in the sand. But my thing is, if I can't work with you, I will work around you.”

In 2001, Easley was featured as part of NASA’s Oral History Interview Series. You can read the full transcript of her interview here:

http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/history/oral_histories/NASA_HQ/Herstory/EasleyAJ/EasleyAJ_8-21-01.htm

You can also read more about Easley here:

<http://www.engadget.com/2015/02/13/annie-easley/>

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Did You Know?

The African Burial Ground National Monument



A New York memorial that commemorates a sacred space.

New York City is home to a bevy of world-famous monuments. Yet, even as a city known for its vast, diverse, and sometimes unexpected offerings, it's probably one of the last places people associate with slavery. However, *The African Burial Ground National Monument* commemorates a 6.6-acre area of land in Lower Manhattan that is recognized as the nation's first burial ground for enslaved and free Africans in America.

An estimated 15,000-20,000 African men, women, and children were buried there, including Africans executed following the 1712 New York Slave Uprising. According to historians, "for an estimated 100-150 years, ending in 1794, the African Burial Ground was the foremost African administered institution in the city of New York; it was a place where African New Yorkers could bury their loved ones with care, maintain and preserve the cultures

they brought to this shore, and it was here that they could pray to the ancestors they revered” (National Park Service).

Although lesser known than some of its famed counterparts, *The African Burial Ground National Monument* represents a significant though often overlooked, piece of the city's and nation's history. While most discussions about slavery in this country focus on the South, the discovery of the burial ground was a reminder that the brutal institution was not limited to Southern states. In fact, during the 17th and 18th centuries, approximately one-third of all Africans in New York were held in bondage at some time (National Park Service).

The burial ground was discovered in 1991 during excavation for a federal office building. It is widely regarded as one of the most significant archaeological finds of the 20th century. After its discovery, anthropologist Michael L. Blakey worked with Howard University scholars to examine all the remains and cultural artifacts that were buried in the cemetery. They were ceremonially reinterred at the memorial site in 2003 (Rothstein).

In addition to the memorial site, the monument includes an informative visitor center.

To read more about this historic monument or to plan a visit the next time you are in NYC:

<http://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm>

http://www.recreation.gov/marketing.do?goto=acm/Explore_And_More/exploreArticles/TheAfricanBurialGroundNationalMonumentNewYorkNewYork.htm

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/26/arts/design/26burial.html?_r=0

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National Park Service. African Burial Ground. n.d. 23 February 2016.

Rothstein, Edward. A Burial Ground and Its Dead Are Given Life. 25 February 2010. Website. 23 February 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/26/arts/design/26burial.html?_r=0>.

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Did You Know? The Whitney Plantation Museum



Photo - Mark Peckmezian for The New York Times

America's first museum dedicated to the narratives of the enslaved

Having opened its doors in 2014, The Whitney Plantation is described as the first slavery museum in America. It is located in Wallace, Louisiana, which is approximately 35 miles west of New Orleans. In contrast to other plantations that merely serve as romanticized Southern tourist attractions, the Whitney Plantation is “a museum dedicated to telling the story of slavery—the first of its kind in the United States” (Amsden). The museum got its unlikely start as a real estate investment for its owner John Cummings, a former attorney and real estate investor, who has since spent 16 years of his life and more than \$8 million of his own money to develop it.

The Whitney Plantation is a nearly 2000-acre plantation that was purchased in 1752 by a family of German immigrants who ran it until 1867. Cummings purchased it after preservationists and environmentalists thwarted attempts by a plastics and petrochemical company to build a rayon manufacturing plant on the property.

A survey of the grounds that the chemical company had commissioned with the hope of supporting their cause is credited as opening Cummings' eyes to the history of not only the plantation but of slavery and its lingering effects in the Americas. He has said he saw the story of slavery unfolding in its log of who built the structures on the property. It led to an awakening that drove him to "read every book he could about slavery." As a result of his new learning, he realized that he wanted to restore the plantation as a museum to educate as many people as he could (Amsden).

To help him achieve this, he hired director of research Ibrahima Seck, a Fullbright scholar from Senegal who has spent the last 13 years helping Cummings bring his dream to fruition. Seck's expertise and contribution to the museum are significant as it is believed that 60% of slaves in New Orleans were originally from Senegal. The result is an unparalleled museum experience.

Great care has been given to restore original historical structures on the plantation such as the "big house," slave quarters, a church, a blacksmith house, and a slave jail. Cummings commissioned renowned artist Woodrow Nash to sculpt life-size sculptures representing enslaved children that are found throughout some of the structures and grounds. Additionally, multiple memorials can be found across the expansive plantation including a wall that lists the names of 107,000 documented slaves who lived in New Orleans prior to 1820. Numerous artifacts and other reminders of daily life on the plantation are also housed on the grounds.

In response to why he has dedicated so much time and money to the project, Cummings replied, "I thought that I would no longer be satisfied living in ignorance."

Watch Whitney Plantation Museum founder John Cummings and director of research Ibrahima Seck discuss the museum:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/402172/the-only-american-museum-about-slavery/>

Read more about The Whitney Plantation or to plan a visit the next time you are in NOLA:

<http://www.whitneyplantation.com/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/magazine/building-the-first-slave-museum-in-america.html#>

Work Cited

Amsden, David. Building the First Slavery Museum in America. 26 February 2015. Website. 2016 February 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/magazine/building-the-first-slave-museum-in-america.html?_r=0>.

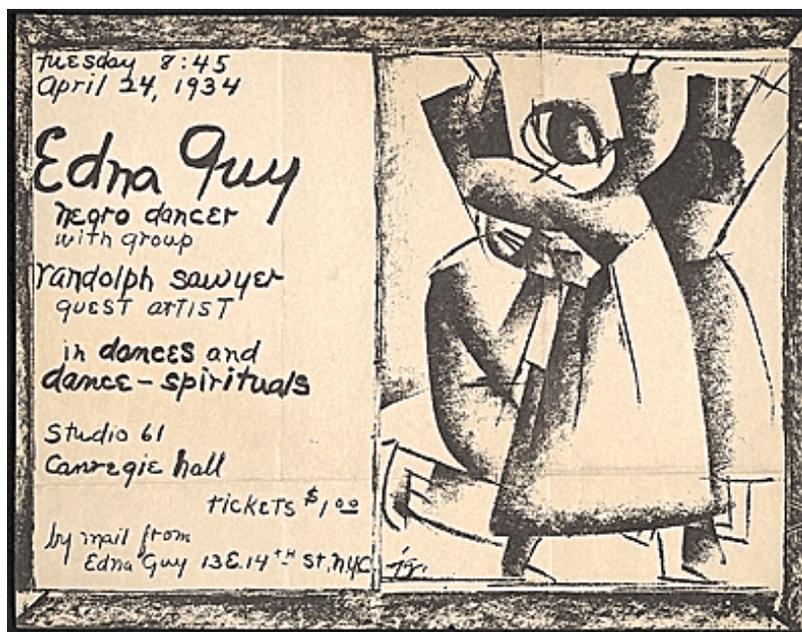
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Did You Know? Edna Guy

A modern dance pioneer.



Modern dance pioneer Edna Guy's rarely told story is prominently featured in the PBS documentary *Free to Dance*, which "challenges the conventional wisdom that modern dance was a creation of white choreographers" (Perron).

Guy's entrée into the world of modern dance began when as a teenager in the early 1920s she wrote a letter to Ruth St. Denis, who is often credited as being one of the creators of modern dance. In her letter, Guy shared her dream to become a professional dancer. St. Denis responded by encouraging Guy to follow her dreams and even extended an invitation to meet her, which she did following a performance.

Despite initially denying Guy admission to her famed Denishawn School of Dance, St. Denis eventually admitted Guy to the school, where she excelled. Although St. Denis praised Guy's ability, Guy did not become a member of the Denishawn dance company upon graduation as she had hoped. Instead, she was given the job of

seamstress for the company. Frustrated, Guy left the company to pursue her dreams. Guy later made another unsuccessful attempt to join the company.

Although St. Denis did not allow Guy to dance as a member of her all-white company, she became a bit of a mentor to her. *Free to Dance* features readings of several letters the women sent to each other throughout the years. In one letter, Guy expressed her frustration after being accepted by a dance school only to later be asked to leave because some dancers objected to having a black dancer in their class. In her response, St. Denis acknowledged her awareness of Guy's constant "race problem" and told her that "some things cannot be forced or hurried." When Guy again wrote expressing disappointment at being passed over for work as a chorus girl at Harlem clubs solely due to her darker skin tone, St. Denis advised that Guy should not relegate herself to performing in "cheap shows in town," though for many black female dancers chorus line work was the only dance work available.

Fueled by St. Denis' words and undeterred by the persistence of racism and colorism, Guy continued to pursue her dream. In 1931 she became a featured artist with Hemsley Winfield's New Negro Art Theatre Dance Group. She also choreographed and performed numerous works, including a variation of one of St. Denis' most renowned pieces, *Madrassi Nautch*. She went on to direct and stage other works as well. One of her most significant pieces, titled *African Plastique* is noted as being her first piece drawn from African themes. She became known for her "dance spirituals."

Along with dancer Allison Burroughs, she staged a dance concert titled *Negro Dance Evening* in 1937. The concert featured all black dancers. It is credited as being "the first joint undertaking of its caliber at the time in America" (Perpener 66). The purpose of the groundbreaking performance was to "create an overview of the aesthetic range of black dance from different cultures of the African diaspora" (Perpener 66). The final piece was an original work from Guy and Burroughs titled *Negro Songs of Protest*. In addition to being a huge success, the concert is also credited with launching the career of Katherine Dunham's storied dance company, which would also go on to play a pivotal role in the evolution of modern dance.

Following the success of the concert, Guy continued to remain active in the modern dance community, including staging a major show at Rockefeller center and serving as a committee member of the American Dance Association.

Read more about Guy and other dance pioneers here:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/17/arts/dance-the-struggle-of-the-black-artist-to-dance-freely.html>

<http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2001/januaryfebruary/feature/free-dance>

Watch the documentary *Free to Dance*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks8HrblH0Kk>

Works Cited

Free to Dance. PBS: Public Broadcasting Service. 2001.

Perpener, John O. African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond. University of Illinois Press, 2001. Book.

Perron, Wendy. DANCE; The Struggle Of the Black Artist To Dance Freely. 17 June 2011. Web Article. 26 February 2016.

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Did You Know? Baby Esther

A singer without whom the iconic American character Betty Boop would not exist.



Despite being dismissed as child’s play by some, cartoons—like most entertainment media—have played a pivotal role in both shaping and reflecting American culture. Many cartoon characters have become iconic cultural figures that have been recycled and re-imagined for generations. One of those iconic characters is Betty Boop. Her image - a confounding mix of overt sexuality and baby singing - has been discussed by scholars and laymen for years. However, while many know the character, few know the interesting story behind it.

Throughout the years, most stories about the origin of the Betty Boop character omitted the name Baby Esther. However, without this little known black jazz singer who was a regular performer at Harlem’s famed Cotton Club in the 1920s, the character would have never existed.

In 1930, cartoonist Max Fleischer introduced the Betty Boop character that would go on to become an international icon. His inspiration for the character was Helen Kane, a white actress and singer who was well known for singing the famous “Boop Oop A Doop” line in her popular recording of the song “I Wanna be Loved.” However, after seeing the Betty Boop character, Kane filed a remarkable \$250,000 infringement suit against Max Fleischer, his company Fleischer Studios, and the Paramount Publix Corporation who produced cartoons featuring the character. The only problem was that Kane was herself not the originator of the trademark line or baby scatting singing style.

During the trial, which began in 1932 and lasted two years, it was revealed that in 1928 Kane and her manager had seen Baby Esther perform using her signature baby scatting style, including her famous “Boop Oop A Doop” line. A few weeks after seeing Baby Esther’s performance, Kane incorporated Esther’s signature baby scatting style into her own singing and recorded several songs using the style, including Kane’s signature song “I Wanna be Loved.” The song, which features Esther’s famous line, was featured in the 1928 musical *Good Boy*. It became a big hit for Kane who enjoyed a successful singing and acting career.

The baby scatting singing style and “Boop Oop A Doop” line, which were now attributed to Kane, became hallmarks of the Betty Boop cartoon character in addition to her sexy style. However, at the trial video of Baby Esther performing and other corroborating evidence proved that Kane had imitated Esther. Therefore, the judge ruled that Kane could not claim to be the originator of the style, and Kane lost her suit. She and her lawyers vowed to appeal but never did.

Unfortunately, Baby Esther’s whereabouts were unknown by the time of the trial. A former manager who testified even presumed that she was dead because he had lost contact with her. Years later a woman named Gertrude Sanders claimed to be the originator of the baby scatting singing style. Some thought she might actually be Baby Esther, but it was never confirmed. Needless to say, whomever or wherever Baby Esther was, she never profited from the Betty Boop character that appeared in 80 cartoons and became a ubiquitous international image with her signature singing style and line. To this day, Kane is still regarded by most as the “Boop Oop A Doop” girl.

For a little fun, watch the original Betty Boop in an early, rarely seen Popeye cartoon

<https://youtu.be/CPUta9zOriM?t=4m25s>

Sources:

For more on Baby Esther and other interesting American History facts visit:

<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/10-black-history-little-known-facts/#.VtPBYUCE491>

<http://www.littlethings.com/real-betty-boop-baby-esther/?vpage=2>

Although this is a Wiki, it has scans of actual news articles from the trial.

http://helenkane.wikia.com/wiki/Baby_Esther_Jones

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Did You Know? Dr. Alexander T. Augusta, M.D.

A surgeon, Civil War veteran, and Howard University professor



Image - Oblate Sisters of Providence Archives

Born a free black man in Virginia in 1825, Dr. Alexander Thomas Augusta made history more than once in his remarkable lifetime.

After being denied admission to medical school due to racism in the United States, Augusta moved to Toronto, Canada where he was able to pursue a medical degree in the 1850s. After graduating from medical school, he ran a successful practice in Canada before he returned to the United States to practice medicine.

With the announcement that “colored regiments” would be formed to fight in the Civil War, Augusta and another black doctor whom he mentored named Anderson R. Abbott wrote letters to President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton requesting that they be appointed as surgeons in these regiments to ensure that black soldiers would receive proper medical treatment. Their requests were eventually granted.

Upon his commission as a major in 1863, Augusta became the first African American to be commissioned as a medical officer in the Army. He served as the surgeon for the 7th Infantry of the United States Colored Troops until two white assistant surgeons wrote President Lincoln to complain about having a black man as their superior. Augusta was then reassigned to a recruiting station for black troops (US National Library of Medicine) before being transferred to Freedmen's Hospital (formerly Contraband Hospital) in Washington D.C. (African American Registry).

Prior to his military appointment, he was appointed the first black head surgeon at Contraband Hospital in Washington D.C. The hospital was built by the Union Army as part of a camp that was created to serve as temporary housing and hospital wards for black soldiers as well as the flood of black civilians and escaped slaves who sought refuge in Washington D.C. following the D.C. Emancipation Act of 1862 (Newmark). Interestingly, the term contraband was used by the Union Army to describe escaped slaves who would not be returned to their masters. Some had escaped to join the Union Army while others had been captured by it.

Augusta was discharged from the Army in 1866. Despite numerous bouts with racism as a result of objections to him being a black commissioned officer, Augusta served with pride. He is said to have remarked, "My position as an officer of the United States, entitles me to wear the insignia of my office, and if I am either afraid or ashamed to wear them, anywhere, I am not fit to hold my commission."

Following his discharge, Augusta worked in private practice in Washington D.C. and taught in the Howard University Medical Department. With his position at Howard he is credited as being the first African American professor of medicine in the United States. Dr. Augusta continued to practice medicine until his death in 1890.

Read more about Dr. Augusta and other Civil War heroes here:

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/bindingwounds/pdfs/BioAugustaOB571.pdf>

http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/alexander-augusta-pioneering-doctor

For more on the fascinating history of Contraband Hospital visit:

<http://www.blackpast.org/perspectives/contraband-hospital-1862-1863-health-care-first-freedpeople>

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African American Registry. *Alexander Augusta, A Pioneering Doctor*. n.d. Website. February 2016. <http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/alexander-augusta-pioneering-doctor>.

Newmark, Jill. *Contraband Hospital, 1862-1863: Health Care For the First Freedpeople*. n.d. Web article. February 2016. <<http://www.blackpast.org/perspectives/contraband-hospital-1862-1863-health-care-first-freedpeople>>.

US National Library of Medicine. "Dr. Alexander T. Augusta: Patriot, Officer, Doctor." n.d. *U.S. National Library of Medicine*. PDF. February 2016. <<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/bindingwounds/inuniform.html>>.